

MEDIA Release

Iowa Department of Inspection and Appeals

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FAKE FOOD INSPECTORS REAPPEAR THROUGHOUT IOWA

DES MOINES, IOWA (February 18, 2011) – Phony health inspectors have reappeared in many parts of the state, including Central Iowa, Iowa Department of Inspections and Appeals (DIA) Director Rod Roberts said. “During the past several days, staff in the Department’s Food and Consumer Safety Bureau have received calls from local restaurant owners and operators who have been harassed by individuals claiming to be health inspectors,” Director Roberts said, adding, “The fake health inspectors often bully the restaurant staff in an attempt to gain cell phone numbers, employees’ social security numbers, or – most recently – solicit cash to ‘make violations disappear.’”

In addition to calls from food establishments, several local health departments that partner with DIA to conduct food safety inspections across the state have contacted the Department to report similar scams operating in their areas. Officials from public health departments in Appanoose, Cerro Gordo, Johnson, Linn, and Shelby counties have all reported attempted restaurant scams perpetrated upon their licensees. Fake food inspectors have reportedly also been scamming restaurants in Maryland, Missouri, New Hampshire, Pennsylvania and Tennessee.

DIA first became aware of the scam last summer when two convenience stores in Atlantic, Iowa, were contacted by fake inspectors who demanded personal information from store clerks. “State and local law enforcement agencies believe that this information, including telephone numbers, may be used by scammers to bypass on-line auction or selling site regulations and establish fraudulent accounts,” Roberts explained. Scammers then use these

accounts to sell fraudulent goods or services with the convenience stores' telephone number on the account, he added.

During the past several months, similar scamming operations have been reported by restaurants and local health departments in central, northern, and east-central Iowa. Asian restaurants appear to be the most commonly targeted food establishment, Roberts said. "We have been told that the fake inspectors threaten the owners with closure unless they cooperate, and, most recently, have suggested that problems could 'disappear' for as little as \$250," the Director added.

A legitimate restaurant inspector will never ask an employee for personal information, will never threaten or intimidate a restaurant worker, and will never attempt to extort money in exchange for fixing a problem, Director Roberts continued. Food safety inspectors at both the state and local level are dedicated individuals who assist owners in the operation of quality establishments; their role is as much educational as it is regulatory, he explained.

Staff in DIA's Food and Consumer Safety Bureau have reported the phony inspector reappearance to the Iowa Public Safety Department for further investigation. "Food establishment operators should never disclose any type of personal information about their employees without the appropriate justification," Roberts said, adding, "Restaurant owners and operators are urged to contact their local health department or the Department of Inspections and Appeals for verification of a person's identity if they have any doubts about an inspector."

Food establishment operators who are contacted by a health inspector asking for personal information prior to conducting a complaint investigation should contact their local law enforcement about a possible scam. Questions about a state food inspector's identity should be directed to the Food and Consumer Safety Bureau at (515) 281-6538.